



From left to right, Joe Nelsen, Morton Brown, Harry Clements, Obed Wells, E.B. "Fritz" Feutz, and Joe Latas pose in front of N5000A, the first production 172.

1956  
50  
2006

# A 172 reunion

If by some chance you've never flown a Cessna 172, then you probably know someone who has. After 50 years and nearly 40,000 built to date, it would be next to impossible to know exactly how many pilots have had some kind of 172 experience, but it's safe to bet that it's a pretty big club. But have you ever wondered about the charter members—the first 172 pilots?

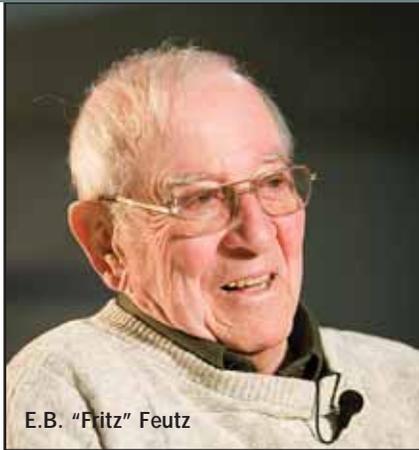
## *Cessna test pilots reunite for a long-awaited look at the first 172*

BY DAVID W. ROBB

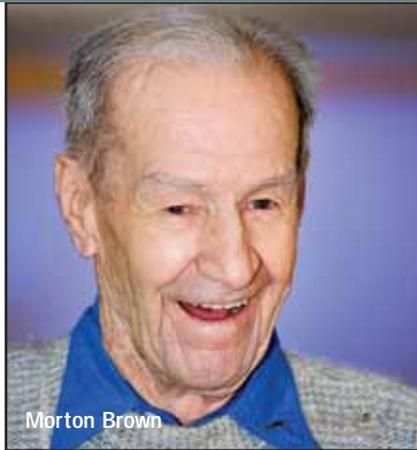
These honors go to Cessna test pilots E.B. "Fritz" Feutz, who made the first flight of the original prototype 172 more than five decades ago, and Morton Brown, who made the first flight of the first production model 172 off the line (see "The Skyhawk Turns 50," page 70) just months later.

Reunion participants gathered in Wichita (left) to see the first 172. Joe Nelsen (below, center), current owner of N5000A, had plenty of questions for members of the original engineering team.

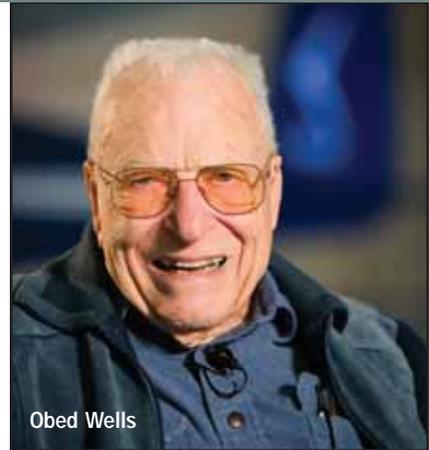




E.B. "Fritz" Feutz



Morton Brown



Obed Wells

The first (and only) 172 prototype was in fact a conventional-gear 170C model secretly modified with a tricycle landing gear. And the very first flight of a 172 was a ferry mission on June 12, 1955, to take this top-secret prototype to a "clandestine" testing base just outside of Wichita and out of sight from the competition, namely Beech Aircraft Corp. and Piper Aircraft Corp.

Does Feutz remember that first flight?

"Yes, vividly," Feutz recalled during a recent interview. "Marketing was paranoid about the public being aware of the [tricycle gear] modification so we had to set up a secret base at Kingman, Kansas, which was a grass strip and a barn for a hangar. The first flight was made at sunup on a Sunday morning."

After working at Beech Aircraft Corp. as an aerodynamics engineer, Feutz jumped at the opportunity to fly for Cessna and in 1953 joined Cessna Aircraft Co. as an experimental test pilot.

Another key figure in the development of the 172, Obed Wells, also remembers that first prototype flight clearly. Wells, now 89, was Cessna's chief project engineer in charge of the 172, as well as other airplane programs, and worked at Cessna for 41 years, ultimately as executive engineer.

"I flew chase plane [in a Cessna 180] on the first flight" of the prototype 172, Wells remembered. "Beech always seemed to know when we were going to fly a new model and had a plane overhead to watch. So we thought we'd fix that and rented a hangar at Kingman field.

"As I recall, we didn't get much above 500 feet on that flight. We took off at first light, flew the plane to Kingman, put it in the hangar, and locked the door—we were back in Wichita before 9 a.m."

The notation in Wells' logbook for that flight on June 12, 1955: "Observed new 172 in flight."

### Tricycle gear comes of age

In 1955, Cessna Aircraft Co. was a beehive of activity, as were many general aviation

manufacturers. Piper in particular was making headlines with its tricycle-gear Tri-Pacer, and Cessna felt intense pres-

## Top of its class

*Reflections from my classroom—the Cessna Skyhawk*

By Kirby Ortega

In 1956 two significant events occurred that had a profound impact on the aviation industry. One, I was born and, two, the Skyhawk went from the drawing board to a mass-produced airplane. Since then not only have I aged, but the airplane has matured as well.

My introduction to the Skyhawk took place when I was 12, in 1968. My father was in the U.S. Air Force in Panama, where he also turned wrenches on an Aero Club fleet in the evenings. My inability to see over the dash or touch the rudder pedals kept me from flying, but I did learn a lot about the inner workings of airplanes by helping Dad take off inspection plates. My reward would be to fly on the test hop.

My first logbook entry as captain of a 172 was February 23, 1976, in N80118, a Cessna Employees Flying Club airplane. At that time, I typically landed in a three-point attitude, causing the airplane to swivel around the nose-wheel and make for some interesting flat spotting of the main tires. In the summer of 1976 I literally lived in the Skyhawk while in Tulsa obtaining my instrument rating and commercial and CFI certificates at Ross School of Aviation based at Riverside Airport (now Richard Lloyd Jones Jr. Airport).

Mark Hopp was the student on my first revenue-producing flight, on November 9, 1976, the day the 172 became my classroom. It was now up to me, with 330 hours and hair down to my shoulders, to help others appreciate the wonder of flight. Since that day I have lost hair, gained years and pounds, and added another 7,000 hours of Skyhawk time to my logbook.

During the winter of 1978 I logged a lot of actual IFR with my instrument students. Since the 172 in my book was "all weather" because

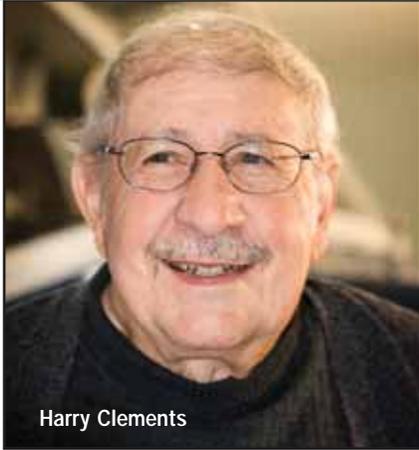
it had pitot heat, we didn't cancel too many flights. With the opportunity to show my students how to recognize airframe ice, N1554E became the unlucky mount. Somewhere on a VOR approach to Runway 3 at Hutchinson,



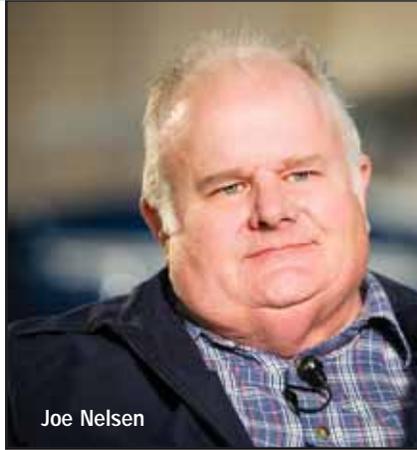
Kansas, we picked up ice, lots of it. It was on the wings, struts, spinner, wheel fairings, and, somehow, the towbar. I recall the struts vibrating and shaking while crossing the final approach fix, or maybe it was just me. With a forgiving wing that continued to produce positive lift until touchdown, we were able to avoid being the opening story on the local 6 o'clock news.

As a highly knowledgeable CFII, I pass on the following lesson: Do not fly a Skyhawk in icing conditions even with pitot heat. Leave the really stupid things for me to do.

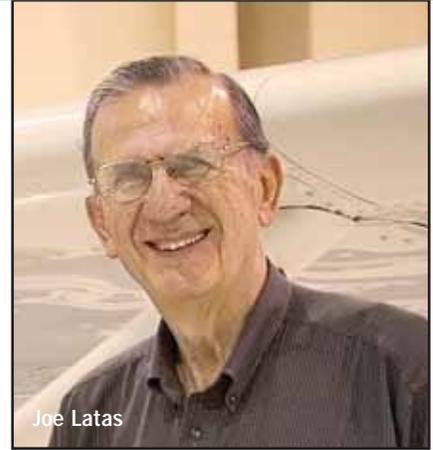
The Cessna Employees Flying Club was a Part 141 school in those days, with a fleet of new 172s, and it made me an assistant chief flight instructor. Cliff Donnelly was the chief production test pilot for Cessna then and also my boss as chief flight instructor at the club. After Donnelly retired, my authority was elevated: I became an airman certification representative. The school had examiner authority; with the last lesson of the curriculum the student



Harry Clements



Joe Nelsen



Joe Lastas

sure to respond with its own nosewheel single. Cessna engineers had been experimenting with a tricycle-gear single-en-

gine mockup on their own.

Cessna had just certified the C model of the 170, with conventional gear, and

was planning to roll it out as the 1956 model of what was a popular and successful airplane. Instead, Cessna management privately and abruptly cancelled the 170 altogether and directed its engineering department to proceed posthaste and in all secrecy with a tricycle-gear single.

“I got a call at home asking if I would come out to the plant [one Saturday] afternoon,” recalled Wells. “When I arrived at the engineering department, Vice President Tom Salter and Chief Engineer Jerry Gerteis announced that we were going to come up with a new airplane that would be tricycle geared, and that it was to be designed and built as a secret project.”

Thus, without fanfare, the now-ubiquitous 172 was launched.

Earlier this year, the original production model 172, N5000A (serial number 28000), took part in its own secret mission back to Wichita. Current owner Joe Nelsen agreed to fly the airplane to Kansas from his home base in Texas with friend and copilot John Delashaw. The airplane, with its distinctive square tail, was carefully tucked away in the corner of a large corporate hangar at Colonel James Jabara Airport to await its reunion with some of the men responsible for its development. With help from former Cessna engineer Joe Lastas, Feutz, Brown, Wells, and Clements were invited by *AOPA Pilot* to come see their “first born” and reflect on its remarkable 50-year run.

As the group gathered on the appointed morning at Jabara, there was an air of expectation and celebration. While these pilots and engineers had worked closely together at Cessna on the 172 and other airplane programs, all are retired and many hadn't seen each other for years. Family and friends were on hand for the event as well.

was awarded his certificate. I had gone from student to teacher to The Hangman.

The day the music died was during the summer of 1986. I had seen Skyhawks birthed at Strother Field in Winfield, Kansas, and when production dropped with sales, production moved to the east side of Wichita's Pawnee Field (now Cessna Aircraft Field). Its final nest was at Wichita Mid-Continent Airport, and it was a very sad day when both production of my 'Hawks and the lights of the facility were shut off. The last “new” Skyhawk I flew in 1986 was N9400L. My classroom was gone.

When the flying club's board met with then-Cessna President Bill Van Sant, we asked the question, “How can we call ourselves a flying club when we don't have any airplanes?” His edict was to do like everyone else: Buy used! We went on a crusade to find pristine Skyhawks, and I first flew N66431 in August 1986. We still have 431 on our ramp today, with more than 10,000 hours' training Cessna employees.

After nearly 10 years of Skyhawk suppression, Cessna's Russ Meyer and AOPA managed to get the General Aviation Revitalization Act passed. Meyer soon was turning over dirt at the site of the new single-engine capital of the world, Independence, Kansas. In September 1996 I returned, to my new classroom, N172NU, one of the first new Cessnas.

In October 2005, I was assigned to an AOPA photo mission to take pictures of both the very first 172, N5000A, and the newest Skyhawk SP while flying over the Independence plant. The owner of 00A was nice enough to bring it up from Texas for the photo shoot. Our company policy requires that only qualified Cessna pilots fly formation during company shoots. The owner reluctantly handed over the keys with a very suspicious look.

You would have thought he was giving me the hand of his 14-year-old daughter to take to her first prom.

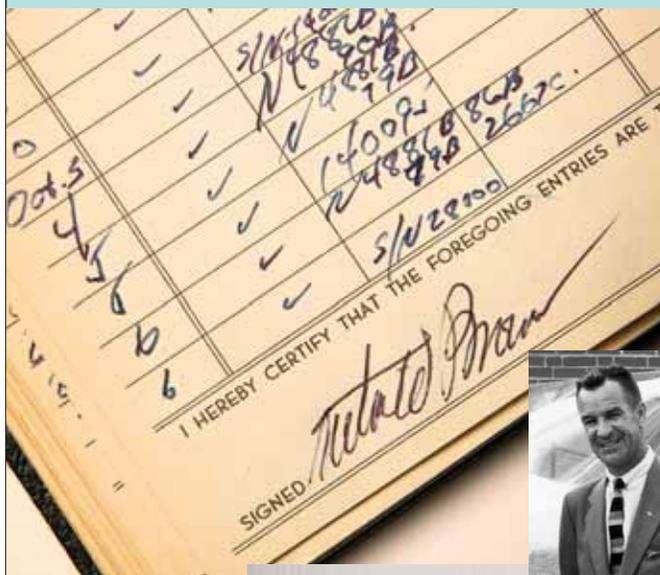
The following month I must have done something to upset my boss because he sent me back to Independence on temporary assignment, to fly first flights on brand-spanking-new Cessnas. I had never before taken a newly built airplane on its first flight, so what a thrill! On top of that, the recent flight in 00A was still a fresh memory.

For my first test flight I lined up on Runway 35 at Independence in N4234K, serial number 172S100018. I had reached a new appreciation for the Skyhawk as it accelerated down the centerline. The Skyhawk is the perfect trainer, personal transport, and ideal platform for the new Garmin G1000 glass panel. Even though it's a 50-year-old airframe design, it has been exceptional to serve as my classroom.

My students are now airline pilots, test pilots, and military jet jockeys. My students are friends and family members (I taught my son how to fly in N441CA). My students have two things in common: They learned in the best classroom, the Skyhawk, and I shared the thrill of flight with them.

Of my more than 14,000 hours as a CFI, about half have been in my classroom—the 172. I'm sure that when I depart westbound for my final flight there is a real good chance 34K will have served as a classroom for some lucky student, CFI, and pilot examiner. Fifty years from today, happy birthday!

*Kirby Ortega, AOPA 1195127, is flight training supervisor, Air Transportation Department, at Cessna Aircraft Co. in Wichita. In 2002, the FAA recognized Ortega as the National Flight Instructor of the Year.*



Morton Brown's logbook (left) records the first flight of N5000A, the first production 172 (serial number 28000) on October 6, 1955. E.B. "Fritz" Feutz, Morton Brown (inset, 1957), Obed Wells, and Harry Clements, their first time together in many years, reminisce about events, people, and places (below).



By nature or training, professional test pilots tend to be unemotional and matter-of-fact about all things aviation (at least on the exterior). But when this group laid eyes on N5000A after so many years, even these "hardened"



professionals couldn't help themselves.

"It's beautiful," exclaimed Wells.

"It's been a long time since I've seen that one," said Brown with a smile. "That's a classy airplane." Brown first flew the airplane on October 6, 1955, as chief of production-flight test. During his 35-year career at Cessna, he was responsible for releasing more than 85,000 airplanes, out of which he personally logged more than 14,000 first flights.

Now 97 years old, the details of that first 172 flight have blended with his other "13,999" first flights. But Brown remembers the essence of his job: to make sure they "fly right, perform right, and look right," he said proudly, looking at the airplane he had flown so many years ago.

So, what is it about the Cessna 172 that has made it the most popular single-engine airplane of all time? After five decades, Brown still has a quick opinion: "It was easy to handle, it had good performance for what a private owner would be looking for, and the tricycle gear made it easy to land and easy to take off. It's a rare airplane, in my opinion. It performs well, and you don't have to be in a hurry with it."

Harry Clements, the Cessna aerodynamicist who optimized the 170's

"square tail," which was later adopted for the first 172, summed it up this way: "To me, the big breakthrough was in a business sense," Clements said. "Up to that point, we had been designing airplanes for people who were already pilots." With the 172, "we opened up a whole new category of people who could use an airplane for business and leisure transportation who would not have even thought of that given how much harder it was to fly a tailwheel airplane."

What did this veteran group of engineers and pilots think about the Cessna 172 five decades and 39,400 units later? We'll give the group the last word.

"The airplane to me is just as good after 50 years," Feutz declared. "I hope the 172 makes it to 40,000...I think it will."

"It's good to see airplanes last so long," Brown said, and added, "They should."

"I'm proud of the fact that the 172 is still being built," Wells said. "There's been a lot of changes, but it's still a 172." **ACPA**

**i** To see video of the 172 reunion, visit AOPA Online ([www.aopa.org/c172](http://www.aopa.org/c172)).

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# A decade of Independence

*Cessna celebrates another anniversary in 2006*

BY JULIE K. BOATMAN

1956  
50  
2006



The Cessna plant in Independence (top). The Cessna Pawnee division in 1975 (right) began in 1929 with five buildings encompassing 55,000 square feet; by 1975, the facility covered 1,362,798 feet.



While the celebration of the Cessna 172's fiftieth birthday may steal center stage, another no-less-important anniversary is taking place in a town in southeastern Kansas.

In July 1996, Cessna opened its new facility in Independence, bringing single-engine piston-aircraft production to the town, population 10,000, and becoming its largest employer (well outpacing the local Wal-Mart), according to chamber of commerce statistics. When the 172 line at Cessna's Pawnee facility in Wichita shut down in 1986, no one knew for certain if the model would come back to life—but there was hope. And when Congress passed the General Aviation Revitalization Act (GARA) in 1994, and Cessna made good on its promise to start building piston singles again,

there was little doubt it would start with its tried-and-true favorite, the 172.

The company picked Independence from four contenders in the state of Kansas. "It was a green field—a clean-sheet, single-engine-piston facility" from the start, says Jack Pelton, current chairman, president, and chief executive officer of Cessna Aircraft. A facility that could handle not only the production of aircraft but also house a world-class customer delivery and acceptance center. And it brought jobs to one of the most economically depressed regions of the state, and, according to Pelton, that fit in well with Cessna's corporate culture.

Pat Boyarski was general manager of single-engine production at the time. "I watched the facility as it was built in Independence, as we hired and trained new employees, and as production ramped up." The company took a core group of about 50 employees from Wichita out to the new factory to help train local workers.

"We decided to call back a large number of retirees who had previously built [the 172] to help our new employees on the line," says Boyarski. Though the majority of the new hires in 1996 had no prior aircraft-assembly experience, Bo-

yarski relates that for “key skilled positions, such as flight line mechanics, we did look for prior experience and preferred A&P-licensed mechanics.”

While the transition wasn't without its challenges, there were advantages to starting with fresh employees. “You can develop an employee from scratch, teaching him or her the skills and behaviors for the particular job that they will perform,” says Boyarski. Bringing back the retiree group also smoothed some of the rough edges.

Within a year of the plant's opening, the 172 was joined by 182s and 206s in production. Now, after a year in which Cessna's Independence facility rolled

out more than 850 singles, the company is looking at increasing production significantly in 2006. Pelton indicated that the current order backlog supports production of nearly 1,000 piston singles for the coming year. So far, more than 6,000 airplanes have been delivered from the plant's wide apron.

In the early days of the Citation Mustang program, Cessna looked at its Wichita facilities and saw a full house. Pelton says the decision to move Mustang production was a way “to reward the folks in Independence while leveraging our floor space,” and he likens the neighboring piston and jet lines to the same mix of Caravans and Citation Xs

## Those guys have guns

By David W. Robb, AOPA Pilot Executive Editor

I have many memories of flying Cessna 172s, but for better or worse the one that stands out featured a nighttime encounter on the ramp with four armed soldiers. This was nowhere near an Air Defense Identification Zone, temporary flight restriction, or no-fly zone, which didn't exist yet as we know them today. This flight took place in the confusing weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when a GA pilot following all the rules still might get a surprise.

After an uneventful nighttime landing at an airport I'd been to many times before, I turned my Cessna 172 toward the taxiway to head back to the departure end of the runway for takeoff. It was about 10 p.m. and, except for the runway lights that I had keyed on, the airport was completely dark and seemingly deserted.

As I rolled along, my taxi light illuminated something just in front of me, so I hit the brakes. In the narrow beam of the light, I could just make out a line of low, unlighted orange barriers blocking my way. It took me a second to realize that the entire taxiway had been closed, I guessed, because it was near a military ramp located at this civilian airport. Someone had neglected to publish a notam.

Before I could turn around, a military truck appeared from the darkness and drove onto the taxiway in front of me. Still in my naive pre-9/11 frame of mind, I actually thought that someone might be coming out to move the barriers for me. Think again. To my surprise, four men—armed with automatic weapons!—emerged from the back of the truck and “deployed” themselves in front of the barriers.

I sat a bit stunned for a few seconds, trying to comprehend the meaning of this standoff between my idling 172 and this armed patrol. Did these guys really think I was a threat, this little red-and-white 1981 P-model Skyhawk sitting there quietly pattering away on the taxiway? In the chaotic atmosphere immediately following 9/11, I considered the possibility that they might. I called on the common traffic advisory frequency, and every other frequency I could think of, to find out what they wanted me to do, but they weren't listening. I guessed they didn't really know what to do either, but they had the guns so I was waiting for them.

Nobody made a move and our face-off continued until, finally, one of them stepped forward crisply and held his weapon up in front of his chest like a sentry might do to say, “Halt, who goes there?” OK, that I could understand—time to turn around and go home. But, to turn around, I knew I would first move toward them before I could get the nosewheel to turn. Would this look threatening? Was it even possible for a 172 to look threatening?

I gingerly added a little throttle and lurched forward a bit while stabbing the rudder pedal to turn the nosewheel, all the while carefully watching for any reaction from the troops. Nobody pointed as much as a finger in my direction, so I added a little more throttle and turned a little more. Still no reaction, so I turned the airplane around 180 degrees and slowly—I mean *slowly*—taxied back the way I had come, the hairs on the back of my neck standing at attention as I could only wonder if they were following me. They didn't, my 172 and I departed uneventfully, and I let the guys with the guns have their taxiway back.

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## Member of the family

By John Hughes

We're currently on our third Skyhawk. This one we purchased in August 2005 after being away from aviation for more than 27 years. At this writing, we've had it less than six months, but have already put more than 50 hours on it, including a trip from Traverse City, Michigan, to the Tampa Bay area to attend the 2005 AOPA Expo.



My wife, Sue, and I both learned to fly during the late 1960s in the Piper Colt, then spent many hours flying Civil Air Patrol Cessna 150s, so when the time came to buy our first airplane in 1970, we chose a Cessna 150. When our first child arrived on the scene in 1971, we moved up to our first Skyhawk, a 1967 model with the Continental six-cylinder engine. In 1974, a newer, more colorful, and better-equipped model caught our eye, so we made the switch to a 1972 Skyhawk, with the four-cylinder Lycoming. This one became known as *Yellow Bird*, and was a definite family favorite. It transported our family, which had grown to three kids by 1976, on many memorable trips. Based in Michigan, we flew to Florida, North Carolina, and Nebraska, and even made a couple of trips to the Washington, D.C., area, with one a night, IFR trip to Washington National Airport. The stork caught up with us again, and when child number four arrived in 1978, we could no longer squeeze the entire brood into the family airplane. So in September 1978, I took my then 6-week-old daughter around the pattern for her first airplane ride and then turned the keys to our beloved *Yellow Bird* over to its new owner.

For the next 27 years, we were too busy with careers and raising kids (we eventually had six) to even think about aviation, much less miss it. However, by 2005 our children had grown and all but one had moved out of the house. Three had married and we now have five grandchildren scattered in various parts of the country. We began to feel the subtle, but firm tug of aviation again. How much easier it would be to fly rather than drive from Michigan, through Chicago, to Peoria, Illinois; to Milwaukee; or to Minneapolis! And our youngest is attending college an eight-hour drive away in Michigan's upper peninsula, which would be less than a two-hour flight. Time to get some dual, clear the cobwebs, and learn all about the alphabet soup of today's airspace. Six hours and a flight review later, we began a three-month search, culminating in the purchase of our latest Skyhawk, a 1977 model with an Air Plains 180-horsepower conversion engine, a two-axis autopilot, and a yoke-mounted GPS. This Skyhawk we've named *Traveler*, and it has already taken us on trips to Overland Park, Kansas; Houghton, Michigan; Thomasville, Georgia; and St. Petersburg, Florida.

That little girl I took for her first airplane ride when she was 6 weeks old is getting married next month in Kansas City, and *Traveler* will be called upon to get us there.

*John Hughes, AOPA 1184074, lives in Interlochen, Michigan.*

**i** More stories on the Cessna 172 from AOPA members may be found online ([www.aopa.org/c172](http://www.aopa.org/c172)).

currently in the main Wichita plant. Efficiencies introduced with the combination of the 172, 182, and 206 lines freed up the space to allow for this new personal jet to come to roost. The company also broke ground on new buildings in late 2004—a 90,000-square-foot flight and delivery building and an 11,000-square-foot aircraft completions building plus expansion of the customer service center—in anticipation of Mustang production.

The Mustang comes to Independence with modern tooling and manufacturing processes already in place, and the workforce—with 10 years of experience behind it—is ready. After all, the 172 goes out the door now with a very similar in-

strumentation and navigation system (the Garmin G1000 integrated flight deck) as the Mustang will—Mustang pilots of the future likely got their start in the company's prodigious singles. There's really no better proof that Cessna's good-faith commitment to invest again in single-engine production—and in a willing rural community—has paid off.

**i** Additional information about Cessna's Independence facility may be found on AOPA Online ([www.aopa.org/c172](http://www.aopa.org/c172)).

AOPA

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